

2017

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EW'S GUIDE TO BOOZE, BARS & NIGHTLIFE

EMILY JENSEN, BRYAN JENSEN AND KAYLON MCALISTER OF THINKING TREE SPIRITS

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

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DRINKING BY THE NUMBERS

OLCC stats show it's easier to find bars, distilleries and liquor stores around Lane County

BY BOB KEEFER

Looking for a bar in Lane County? You shouldn't have to look too hard. According to the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, as of Feb. 7 Lane County had 331 licensed establishments where you can buy distilled spirits by the glass. That number includes 193 in Eugene and 53 in Springfield.

That adds up to one bar for every 1,015 residents of Lane County: one for every 860 in Eugene, and one for every 1,135 in Springfield. Those licensed establishments cover everything from a handful of non-profit private clubs, such as the Elks, to full-on commercial barrooms and restaurants open to the public, says Christie Scott, alcohol program spokesperson for the OLCC in Portland.

Bars are on the increase, she said. Ten years ago, Lane County had 273 licensed liquor outlets, with 147 in Eugene and 42 in Springfield. Those numbers reflect a 21 percent increase in the number of licensed hard liquor outlets in Lane County; a 26 percent increase in Springfield; and a 31 percent increase in Eugene.

(For the numerically obsessed: In 2006, the population ratios were one bar for every 1,244 people in Lane County, one for every 1,011 in Eugene and one for every 1,359 in Springfield.)

"We've seen increases in liquor licenses across all categories," Scott says. "But we've also seen significant population increases in all those areas."

The biggest current boom for liquor sales is in licensed distilleries — the places where hard liquor is made. Lane County had two distilleries a decade ago; it now has nine — six of those in Eugene, one in Springfield and one in Oakridge (the other is in unincorporated county territory).

And beyond that, since about 2011, Scott said, the OLCC has been licensing distillery tasting rooms, similar to wine tasting rooms. Two have opened in Lane County: Heritage Distilling Co., at 110 Madison Street, and Thinking Tree Spirits, 88 Jackson Street.

"Oregon is ahead of the national trend," Scott says. "We are the leading state in distilleries."

All this reflects a national trend toward increased consumption of hard liquor, from whiskey to vodka and gin, as opposed to wine and beer, Scott says. Leading that trend, she says, is that more middle-aged women are drinking whiskey now, instead of the traditional white wine or sweet cocktails.

Don't care to hit the bar scene? Rather drink at home?

Lane County has 18 licensed liquor retail stores, including five in Eugene and three in Springfield. (There are 267 statewide.) That means Lane County now has one liquor store for every 18,870 customers.

Two more liquor outlets, Scott says, are about to open for business, both in existing retail stores.

This reflects a change in OLCC policy. In the past, the agency generally licensed only retailers who specialized in liquor sales.

The exception was extremely remote places, such as Lake County's tiny Christmas Valley, where OLCC for years licensed a small retail liquor shelf at the local hardware store. (Perhaps to the chagrin of Christmas Valley residents, the store was recently sold, Scott says, and the license lapsed.)

"That sort of combination store was really successful in rural areas," she says. "So now we're trying to improve the experience for the customers elsewhere."

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BEST BARTENDER IN LANE COUNTY

Crystal Gerig serves up whiskey and PBR at the Horsehead

BY BOB KEEFER

Cystal Gerig has three rules for successful bartending: Fake it until you make it. Being able to multitask is huge. And be aware of everyone. “Make sure people are in a safe environment,” she says. “Make sure people are happy. And still take care of your work.” Adhering to those three simple rules may be why Gerig, 28, pulled the most votes for Best Bartender in Lane County in an online Eugene Weekly poll last month. She works four days a week at Eugene’s Horsehead Bar, 99 W. Broadway.

A Seattle native, Gerig grew up in Salem and landed here ten years ago to go to Lane Community College. After school she worked various jobs — selling coffee at a bakery, for instance — before finding her way to the Horsehead, a popular downtown bar with a downhome atmosphere, three years ago.

“I knew the bouncers here,” she says. “And I was really sick of my other job.”

So for three years she’s mixed and poured drinks from Manhattans and gimlets to whiskey sours and whiskey gingers, the latter one of the most popular drinks at the Horsehead. Whiskey is said to be increasing in popularity recently, especially among middle-aged women. “Whiskey is good!” Gerig said. “I am glad that middle-aged women are finally catching on.”

The bar also, of course, sells a lot of beer — especially Pabst

Blue Ribbon.

“We’re No. 1 in Oregon for selling PBR,” she says. “And we’re No. 14 in the United States!”

On her days off, Gerig is a beginning mushroom picker — “It’s nice to be outside in the fall,” she says — and an experienced artist, inspired by her grandmother, who also painted. Gerig does her own paintings in acrylic on canvas, generally with nature themes: landscapes, animals and birds.

The Horsehead is having a show of her work during March.

Running a downtown bar takes a certain finesse with the public. Gerig says she hasn’t really had any big problems with the bar’s clientele, though naturally she’s had to cut people off and occasionally ask people to leave.

“It’s pretty easy to read people,” she says. “You talk to them as humans, instead of ‘Get the fuck out!’ That never works well.”

And as for being a woman bartender, she says that’s usually an advantage with difficult drunks. “Sometimes people are more receptive to a woman telling them they’re out of line,” she says. “I can’t say it’s harder being a woman than being a man, because I’ve never been a man bartender.”

Coming up on the third anniversary of her employment at the Horsehead, she says she’s pleased to work there. “I like it,” she says. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t like it.”

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HERITAGE DISTILLERY

THAT'S THE SPIRIT

Lane County loves to distill

BY ANDY VALENTINE

To our squealing delight, craft distilleries are on the rise. In the last six months, a number of brand-new spirit operations have popped up in and around Eugene, and they're all great at what they do. Here are a few for you to try.

HERITAGE DISTILLING CO.

The first thing you notice stepping into Heritage Distilling's new location at First Avenue and Madison Street is the atmosphere. The tasting room is cozy, copper-tone, oaky, boozy, warm, inviting.

The adjectives continue to mount. Affordable flights await at the bar, where five half-ounce shots go for \$5 total, and the cocktails are competitive. But digging beyond first impressions is a crucial part of getting to know a drinking place. Under this exciting cosmetic experience beats a passionate heart and a thirst for customization rarely found in such establishments. At the center of it all sits J.P. Wensel, founder and head distiller.

A practicing physician for many years, Wensel's love of beverage craft drives him to operate Heritage on the side. That is, he operates Heritage *as well as* being a physician. He is also a licensed wine and fine-spirit sommelier, a fact that becomes evident when he gets to talking about booze.

Heritage opened its first distillery in Gig Harbor, Washington, in 2012; its Eugene distillery opened in October.

On the subject of rye whiskey, one of Heritage's specialties, Wensel says: "Rye, in the United States anyway, is any whiskey that's distilled from a mash bill of at least 51 percent rye. In this case it's 95 percent rye. We like rye. Rye's flavor profile is totally different — you're going smell and taste orange oil, cloves, pepper — it's a lot different than bourbon."

Beyond formidable knowledge and fine-tuned products, though, Wensel and his crew are also passionate about encouraging people to learn about the craft. Heritage's My Batch program is designed so that anybody with an interest in distilling can come to the state-of-the-art distillery, spend three hours learning how to distill and bottle their own spirit, then take two bottles home. The class costs \$149.

It's an educational process born from a love of the craft. Pair this with Heritage's fully customizable personal cask program, Cask Club, in which your own personal cask is stored at the facility, aged a year at a time, and you're on your way to spirit heaven.

Overarching conclusion: The liquor at Heritage is delicious, and it's a result of knowledge and quality ingredients. As Wensel puts it, "It's a question of good grain and careful distillation techniques."

Heritage Distilling Co. is located at 110 Madison St. The tasting room opens at noon seven days a week. For more information on My Batch and Cask Club programs, visit heritagedistilling.com.

THINKING TREE SPIRITS

Farther west in the Whiteaker neighborhood, farm-to-flask liquor startup Thinking Tree Spirits has just opened for business. The place is smaller and more DIY, but no less inviting.

With a focus on sustainability, founder Emily Jensen — along with her husband, Bryan Jensen, and their partner Kaylon McAlister — aims to celebrate locally sourced ingredients and create a taste experience unique to the region. Everything down to the molasses in the rum is locally sourced. With this in mind, the resulting cocktails are bound to be amazing.

“Our cocktails are really special,” Jensen says. “We squeeze all super-fresh juice and add all sorts of wonderful herbaceous tenacious herbs.”

She says their vodka is a top seller, but the Jensens have a passion for whiskeys and rums, of which Thinking Tree will soon have a profusion. The product is created in a high-quality still and refined through mostly repurposed machinery — much of it comes from old dairy equipment — even the bar in the tasting room is made of repurposed wood from the building’s original 1927 siding.

For Jensen, who is also a member of well-known local music act Eleven Eyes, our region’s bounty is always at the forefront. In a way, Thinking Tree is an extension of Jensen herself. She says the name is derived from images of Pacific Northwest freedom — singing under trees, the music, the abundance of the Willamette Valley.

The air in the distillery smells authentically yeasty, rustic and evocative of Northwest ideals. If you want to smell it yourself, Thinking Tree is already open; a formal grand opening is slated for mid-March, depending on the availability of product.

Jensen says the whiskey will decide the timing of the grand opening — a fitting quip for someone whose mission is focused on the valley’s voice and allowing the territory to speak for itself.

Thinking Tree Spirits is located at 88 Jackson St. As of now, the tasting room is open 3-7 pm Thursdays, 3-8 pm Fridays and Saturdays. Check out their Facebook page for more information and updates.

DEEP WOODS DISTILLERY (OAKRIDGE)

It’s always worth a drive to Oakridge.

Highway 58 is beautiful. Along the way you’ll pass thousands of evergreens, acres of farmland, lakes, rivers, campsites and waterfalls. After a knockout bout with the recession, Oakridge is slowly repositioning itself as a mecca for outdoorspeople, recreationists and lovers of all things craft.

The traveling drinker’s treat, of course, awaits on First Avenue — the town’s cultural hub. Here, among other gems, sits Deep Woods Distillery.

Husband-and-wife team Mick Garvin and Cindy Noblitt opened their tasting room late last year and have since seen a positive response. DIY by nature, Deep Woods Distillery is still in its nascent stages, but creative forces have already taken hold. The small facility comes complete with a garden, which in summertime will bear fruit for use in the distillery’s various unique products.

“We’ll do a lot of berries,” Garvin says. “We have some plums and cider apples planted ... raspberries,

blueberries, strawberries, blackberries, loganberries.”

With an extensive background in forest contracting and preservation efforts, the pair has seen its share of Oregon’s great outdoors. Garvin and Noblitt hold nature and outdoor communities in high regard, and this works its way by osmosis into Deep Woods’ spirits.

Fruit aside, their best-selling spirit is a grain neutral gin substitute called “Fir of the Doug,” which contains spring tips of Douglas fir. Gathered and frozen during various contracting gigs, the young tree tips give this liquor an uncanny forest smell. With a powerful nose but surprisingly subtle, floral flavor, Fir of the Doug is perfect for use in cocktails that would ordinarily call for gin.

“Because of all of our work, we’re in the right place at the right time to get the tips,” Noblitt says. “I guess it’s fairly unique. I know of one other distillery in Oregon that uses the tips, and they use it in a brandy.”

True to form, Deep Woods Distillery offers a good few other spirits you probably haven’t tried before. One such liquor is Krupnikas, a spiced honey liqueur popular in Poland and Lithuania. Don’t be fooled by the word “liqueur,” though. As Garvin puts it, the way they drink this stuff in Europe is strong enough to “light your breath on fire.”

“They drink it pretty high-velocity back there,” he says. “We’re gonna put it out, oh, probably about 90 proof.”

A preliminary nose-pinch is not required when drinking Krupnikas. The result is a sweet, spicy, Christmasy hug in a glass. You can really taste the balance, the hours Garvin and Noblitt have spent trying to perfect the recipe. At the end of the day, balance is key to the business as a whole, just as it is in nature.

Deep Woods Distillery supports its community by hiring local artists to design its labels (depicting local landforms), using sustainable practices (such as those found with the Doug fir tips) and by encouraging you to visit them in Oakridge, as you’ll enjoy the experience more than a bottle from your local liquor store.

Plus, as you already know, the nature in Oakridge is fantastic — like the Alpine mountain bike trial near town.

“If you are familiar with the trails around here, Alpine goes up a ridge, back over there, and overlooks Oakridge, facing the Cascades,” Garvin says. “On the right day you’ll be able to watch as the shadows cover the valley, but the sun is still across the mountain tops and the full moon is coming up over the cascades. It’s probably going to be a label someday.”

Deep Woods Distillery is located at 48217 E. First Street, Oakridge. For more information on hours and products, phone 541-968-4623.



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WHERE DO YOU GO TO HAVE A DRINK?

Local trendsetters share where they go and what they order
when they're in the mood for a drink



BRIAN MCWHORTER

Conductor of Eugene's OrchestraNext and a professor of trumpet at the University of Oregon School of Music and Dance

Close call between **Rye** and **Izakaya Meiji** — I like both places because of the dark, mysterious and (relatively) quiet vibe. But Izakaya wins because they're open until 1 am — perfect for people in show business like me. Along with so many other bars in Eugene, Rye closes too damn early.

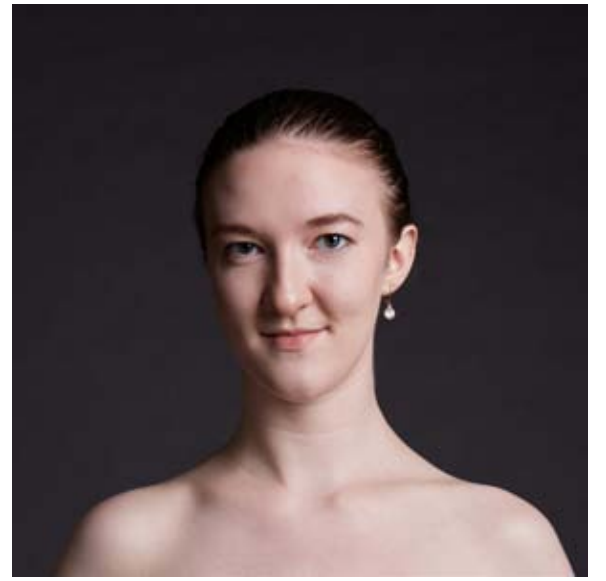
While I like the cocktails at both places, I generally like to settle down with a nice scotch — and both places have plenty of options for me. Just one icecube, please.



KITTY PIERCY

Former Eugene mayor and inveterate arts advocate

We rarely go out for a mixed drink. However, we do enjoy the occasional festive Manhattan at **Belly** or **Le Bar**. We prepare some very nice cocktails for holiday dinners at home with friends. We just returned from Cuba, where the mojito cocktail appeared with every meal.



SARA STOCKWELL

Dancer with Eugene Ballet

Izakaya Meiji is probably my favorite bar in the area. The fact they're open and serve food late enough to go there after evening rehearsals or performances is a huge plus. They also do a remarkable job with both; I'm always impressed by their consistency. The ambience is great, the playlist is varied and not too loud, and the staff is attentive, friendly and efficient.

I like trying new things and have never had a bad drink there, so I don't actually have a go-to drink. The bourbon and ginger (made with house-pressed gingerade) is always a good choice though. And the Lion's Tail (bourbon, pimento dram and citrus) is great.

Of course there are lots of other great places in Lane County, and like my drink order at Meiji, I like to vary where I go!



RICHARD SWIFT
Producer, singer, songwriter and keyboardist formerly with The Shins

Meiji in Eugene is my favorite. Really great drinks, food and environment. A friend of mine worked there and he made the best, most interesting margarita. Not too sweet and spritzed with mezcal on top. Rimmed with black lava salt too. The food there is great and very affordable.

Another friend of mine owns my two other favorites, **The Axe and Fiddle** in Cottage Grove and **Planktown** in Springfield. Both make great bloody marys and have a very mellow/comfortable environment.

Can't lose with all three of these in my opinion.



EUGENIA SLIMESWORTH
Eugene's Slug Queen

Favorite bar? **The Horsehead**.

Their patio is the best place in town for an elegant lady such as myself to get day-drunk.

Favorite drink there? Double gin-and-tonic. Best if served with a plate of fries or nachos.



JUAN CARLOS VALLE
Activist, advocate for immigrants' rights, and sometime Eugene City Council candidate

The Lounge [on River Road] is my local favorite. My favorite drink there is mojito.

It's a place where you feel welcome. A place where there is no stress about finding parking. A place where a pool table is in the ready mode. A place where karaoke rooms delight your guests. A place where disco music and salsa music makes anyone want to move. A place where the bar and lounge area is hip and cool.

What's unique about this bar is the mosaic of cultures and food they serve. You feel at home because you are at home. The owner is an Asian man, and his clientele are from many walks of life. Food is tasty and there is something for everyone.



RACHAEL MCDONALD
News host for Morning Edition at KLCC

I am not much of a barfly but I do have a few favorites. One is **Isakaya Meiji**. I love their bourbon and ginger. It's consistently delicious, tart, bright and with just the right amount of pungent ginger. They also have yummy food and a fun atmosphere.

The Meiji fits in so well in the Whiteaker neighborhood and, although I'm not a night owl, they're one of the few restaurants that stay open late in Eugene. Also, I have to give a shout out to Ty Connor. He doesn't work at the Horsehead anymore. But when he did, he made a mean gin gimlet.

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